

Witchcraft in Britain

Legislation

Although there were accusations of sorcery in the medieval period, and even occasionally a trial, neither the Church nor secular courts considered magic to be a major social problem. Thus, witchcraft was not defined as a crime in England until 1542 in the latter stages of Henry VIII's reign. The legislation was repealed on the accession of Edward VI but reinstated in 1563, perhaps because of anxiety that factions were plotting against Elizabeth and possibly resorting to magic. The Act made killing people by witchcraft punishable by death.

It was the accession of James VI to the throne of Scotland (and later, as James I to England) that accelerated allegations and trials of witches across both kingdoms. In 1589, James travelled to Norway to marry his betrothed, Anne of Denmark, who had been forced to shelter there when her journey to Scotland ran into severe storms. The couple faced similar bad weather on their return journey. James became convinced that witches in both Denmark and Scotland had cursed his fleet and the following year attended the trials of those held responsible in North Berwick. In 1597, he published *Daemonologie*, a philosophical treatise on black magic that endorsed the prosecution of witches.

A new Witchcraft Act early in James's reign made it a capital offence to invoke evil spirits or commune with familiar spirits. These 'familiars' were said to inhabit the body of animals, so in extreme cases, having a pet could condemn you as a witch. The 1604 Act was extended to the American colonies and was the legislative context for the Salem witch trials in 1692–93.

Witch trials

The seventeenth century witnessed the majority of the witchcraft trials, with around 500 people sentenced to death in England and an estimated 3,000–4,000 in Scotland. Famous cases included the Pendle trials of 1612 when ten convicted witches were paraded through the streets of Lancaster and hanged. Between 1644 and 1646, the self-styled 'Witchfinder General', Matthew Hopkins, prosecuted a series of trials resulting in the execution of over 100 people including 68 at Bury St Edmunds and 19 at Cheltenham.

By the early eighteenth century, concern about witchcraft had waned. The last Englishwoman to be hanged was Alice Molland of Exeter in 1685 and in 1727, Janet Horne was burned to death for consorting with the devil in Dornoch, Scotland. In 1736 many of the Acts against witchcraft were repealed, but fines could still be imposed on those claiming to use magical powers.

Interpretations

Research undertaken by Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane in the 1970s revealed that most witchcraft trials in England were not instigated by authorities but were the result of tensions in local communities in a period of rapid social and economic change. Macfarlane found that the majority of those accused of being witches were the poorer in society, and those making the allegations were wealthier. Typically, a poor woman would seek charity from a richer neighbour. Refusal might then be followed by misfortunes befalling the family and the woman would be accused of witchcraft.

Analysis of court records also revealed the identity of those accused of being witches. The vast majority were female, with over 90% of those indicted for witchcraft in the south-eastern assizes being women. Contemporaries considered women to be morally and intellectually weaker and thus more prone to being entrapped by the devil. Women most likely to be accused of witchcraft were elderly, widowed, poor and often disabled or with learning disabilities. However, any troublesome neighbour might be accused of witchcraft and there are several well-documented cases of men of the middling sort being brought to trial and executed.

The obsession with witches was not confined to Britain but was a Europe-wide phenomenon. The so-called 'witch craze' was at its height after the Reformation in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Fuelled by socio-economic, legal and confessional tensions, around 100,000 Europeans were caught up in official witchcraft proceedings until the eighteenth century and about 50,000 were executed.

1542
 Witchcraft Act
 (repealed 1547)

1586
 Witchcraft Act
 passed in Ireland

1597
 King James VI of Scotland
 publishes *Daemonologie*

1612
 Pendle witch trials

1685
 Alice Molland hanged
 for witchcraft in Exeter

1717
 Last English witch
 trials held in Leicester

1736
 Many of the Acts against
 witchcraft were repealed

1540

1560

1580

1600

1620

1640

1660

1680

1700

1720

1740

1563
 Witchcraft Acts passed
 in England and Scotland

1590
 North Berwick
 witch trials

1604
 Witchcraft Act

1644–46
 Matthew Hopkins, the
 'Witchfinder General', prosecutes
 a series of trials in East Anglia

1711
 Islandmagee witch
 trials, the last in Ireland

1727
 Janet Horne of Dornoch, Scotland
 burned to death for witchcraft

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